

# **The spiritual mechanisms at work in the construction of the effect of the sacred meaning: the spatial logics invested in the architecture of worship places of the three monotheistic religions**

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This article presents an anthropological and semiotic approach to religion, as well as an academic and achronic analysis of the religious fact as a "fact of society, within the framework of the social interaction. It, also, establishes the relation with the architecture of worship places as a representation of religion. Its object is the mechanisms of meaning which work on the articulation between the expression level and the content level while focusing on the representation of a single God and his investment in the architecture of worship places for the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

The question is, therefore, about the articulation between the architecture of worship places and religion in relation to a code of interpretation determined by religion. This code determines the relationships between spatial signifiers and signifieds. Our objective is thus to highlight engrammed configurations according to (Rénier, 2005 p.22), called "abstract configurations" on the content level, in physical conformations. According to Rénier, this belongs to a grammar of societal space-time and induces a relational variety between space, time and actors.

The approach presented is based on these two hypotheses:

- The effect of the "sacred" meaning is constructed and invested spatially in different forms by religions. We postulate that there are mechanisms of a spiritual order which are at the genesis of the construction of the effect of the sacred meaning. The meanings conveyed by worship places are therefore tributary to these spiritual mechanisms.
- The representation of a single God specifically permeates the architecture of the worship places of the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

To begin this research, we defined different levels of knowledge in relation to the semiotic mechanisms that underlies their articulation. (The spiritual / the sacred / religion) are correlated with (the deep level / surface level / manifestation level) relatively to "the generative trajectory of

meaning". The notion of the "generative trajectory of meaning" (Greimas et Courtés, 1993) is a dynamic process recognized at the content level and presenting mechanisms of meaning allowing to pass from a representation level to another.

## **The meaning of monotheism and the representation of God**

According to our investigation, the meaning of monotheism is invested differently, according to the three religions. It obeys a sort of increasing progression, corresponding to a hierarchy of levels, ranging from the "narrative" event expression inscribed in space / time, to a presentation in a representation corresponding to an analogical stage "God-man" , which itself precedes the access to a more conceptual level. This progression is equivalent to the chronological appearance of the three religions. Each of them is tied to a definite level that characterizes it, and that makes it possible to present differently the meaning of monotheism in relation to the three levels of representation presented in the "generative trajectory of meaning": narrative, figurative and conceptual.

The three religions are considered as participants in the same operation of constructing the monotheism meaning by implementing different mechanisms of meaning corresponding to different representation levels. The level of manifestation corresponding to religion is an interruption in the course followed by the manifestation of representations system. This manifestation is thus impregnated by one of the three levels of the course (narrative / figurative / conceptual). Hence the narrative status of the Judaic religion, the figurative status of Christianity and the conceptual status of Islam in relation to the representation of a single God, and in the sense of monotheism.

## **Sacralization, construction of the sacred meaning's effect.**

The revelation period is a period of first mediation which determined the construction of the sacred meaning effect for each religion. The advent of a new religion and the establishment of a new semantic universe are determined historically by the various actions of the respective mediators to transmit the message of God. The application of the actantial model of Greimas (see fig. 1) enabled us to present three different ways of constructing the sacred meaning effect, depending on whether they are related to "the subject" ("Jesus" for Christianity), to "the object" (the message of God,

"the Koran" for Islam) or to the perpetual movement in the historical quest for the sacred for Judaism.

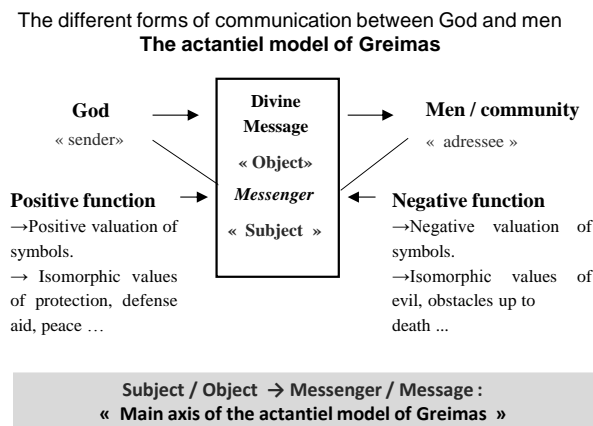


Fig.1: Greimas actantiel model applied to our field of investigation with reference to the application of the model according to (Lévy, 2003 p.49).

In relation to the system of relations ensuring the communication between God and men and through the historical and religious narratives proper to the two messengers, we have noted two types of opposite relations: a relationship of disjunction between “the subject” and “the object” for Christianity , and a relationship of conjunction / non-disjunction between “the messenger” and the “message” for Islam. Each of these two relations is at the genesis of the actualization of original schemas, called structures according to Gilbert Durand (1998), and of a system of symbols grouped around these original schemas. This distinction characterizes each of the two religions. We thus noted:

- The update of the heroic structure for Christianity corresponding to (diurnal regime)
- The update of the mythical structure for Islam corresponding to the (nocturnal regime)
- For Judaism, we have noted the updating of the synthetic structure corresponding to the symbolism of progression, which is determined according to Gilbert Durand (1998) by the *"diachronic representation which links contradictions by the time factor"*. It is these structures that support the antagonistic logic.

The three logics underlying the construction of the effect of the sacred sense are determined by the identification of the symbolic prototype or figurative structure according to the terminology of Gilbert Durand (1995) for each symbolic system, and by the determination of the structure of the

the imaginary actualized, and likely to organize the constellations imaged through the schemes of action. (see fig.2)

	Figurative structures	Structures of the imaginary	Symbolism & Scheme of action
Judaic symbolic system	Earthly Jerusalem → The Heavenly Jerusalem	Synthetic structure The images of the cycle (circle, time, return ...) <b>NOCTURNE REGIME</b>	The symbolism of progression « <i>Diachronic representation that links the contradictions by the time factor</i> »
Christian symbolic system	Jesus / The Cross Jesus = Christ	Heroic structure <b>DIURNE REGIME</b>	The symbolism of separation and the verbal structure "rise" and "separate"
Muslim Symbolic System	The Koran / The "Ka'ba"	Mystical structure <b>NOCTURNE REGIME</b>	The symbolism of crystallization and the verbal structure "unite" and "connect"

Fig.2: Figurative structures, imaginary structures and action patterns relating to the three religions (Auteure, 2015)

## The three logics of spatial construction of the sacred meaning effect

The correlation between the two approaches, semiotic (relative to Greimas semiotics) and anthropological (relative to Gilbert Durand's anthropology of the imaginary), made it possible to identify "three spatial logics" of construction of the sacred meaning effect in relation to the same foundation of the space which is characterized by its continuity. These logics lie on three principles which we correspond, according to a semiotic perspective to the states of conjunction and disjunction, and to the transformations noted in the enunciation.

- • **The bonding principle** "conjunction", ( $S \wedge O$ ) : relation of conjunction or non-disjunction  
**"CONTINUITY"**  
 → Unified vision: Space is considered in its continuity.
- • **The principle of dissociation** in opposition to the principle of "disjunction" bond, ( $S \vee O$ ): disjunction relation  
**"SEPARATION"**  
 → Separatist vision: Opposition between sacred space and secular space.
- • **The principle of passage** **"TRANSFORMATION"**  
 • Passage from a state of conjunction to a state of disjunction or the contrary  
 $(S \wedge O) \rightarrow (S \vee O)$  or  $(S \vee O) \rightarrow (S \wedge O)$   
 → Synthetic vision to link the two other principles over time. Space is the site of a continual quest for the sacred.

Thus, the sacralization of worship places in relation to the three monotheistic religions is determined: First, by a unifying vision based on the principle of connection. Secondly, by a separatist vision that makes it possible to establish "the subject" and "the object" through

disjunction, based on the principle of dissociation. Or, lastly, a synthetic vision based on the principle of transformation.

## Choosing the corpus

To study closely the different spatial logics of the construction of the sacred meaning effect, we have limited our corpus to the three most representative monuments of the three monotheistic religions that have marked the city of Tunis: The Great Synagogue of Osiris (1937), The Ezzitouna Great Mosque (864) and The Great Cathedral of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Olive (consecration 1953). The symbolic intensity of the three monuments is conducive to revealing the different spatial conceptions relating to the spiritual foundations of each religion.

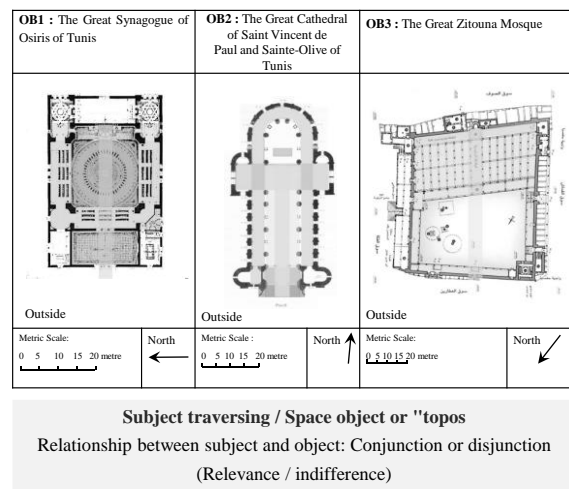


Fig. 3: The plans of the three most representative monuments of the three monotheistic religions in the city of Tunis

Through the various places of worship that we have presented, we detect a linear spatial conducive spread for the study of a syntactic sequence relating to a trajectory leading from the outside to the various places most valued in places of worship. The spatial succession, which we have tried to highlight in the various places of worship presented, is conducive to being compared to a "textualization" in the sense that Alain Rénier had presented (1981, p.23). The articulation according to "a chain of spatial successiveness" is thus promising to reveal the specificity of the worship places relating to the different religious conceptions taking into consideration their respective spiritual bases. We referred to the conceptual framework established by Manar Hammad (2006) to relate two uses of the term trajectory. One in semiotics of space and architecture which belongs to the nonverbal domain, and the other in the metalanguage of semiotics as a discipline and which belongs to the verbal domain.

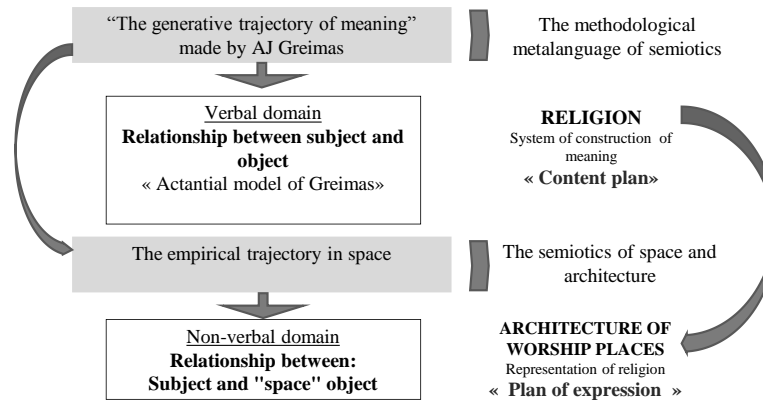


Fig.4: Correlation between "the generative trajectory of meaning" and "the empirical trajectory in space"

## Demonstrations

The projection of the figurative structure (see fig.2) affects the places of worship differently. However, we notice the presence of a linearity that connects spatially and respectively "*the Eikhal*", the high altar, the "*mihrab*" to the main entrance or to one of the entrances. This linearity projects a temporal succession in space across a trajectory, thus connecting all the significant spaces of the place of worship. So, the action program consists in having the traversing subjects (who are the faithful subjects respective of the three religions) cross the spaces of the three places of worship according to the three pre-established trajectories (see fig.3). The space becomes the objective of the topic's action. Referring to the work of Manar Hammad, the cutting of the course into different "*topoi*"<sup>1</sup> is determined by the survey of edges, objects of a possible crossing on the part of the subject. The edges allowing to create a difference between two successive "*topoi*" can be material or virtual. Crossing the edge of a "*topos*" is equivalent to the conjunction of the subject traversing with the "*topos*".

- Our analysis shows that for the synagogue, the visual conjunction with the Torah scrolls (the contents of the holy cupboard) is relevant to the traversing Subject. It is performed during the time of the release of the scrolls of the Torah during services in the synagogue. **We qualify the relation between the traversing subject and the terminal state of the course by the relevance of non-conjunction and visual temporal disjunction.**

<sup>1</sup> "*Topoi*": Plural form of "*topos*". The "*topos*" is a portion of space that is likely to play a syntactic and actantial role (Hammad, 2006).

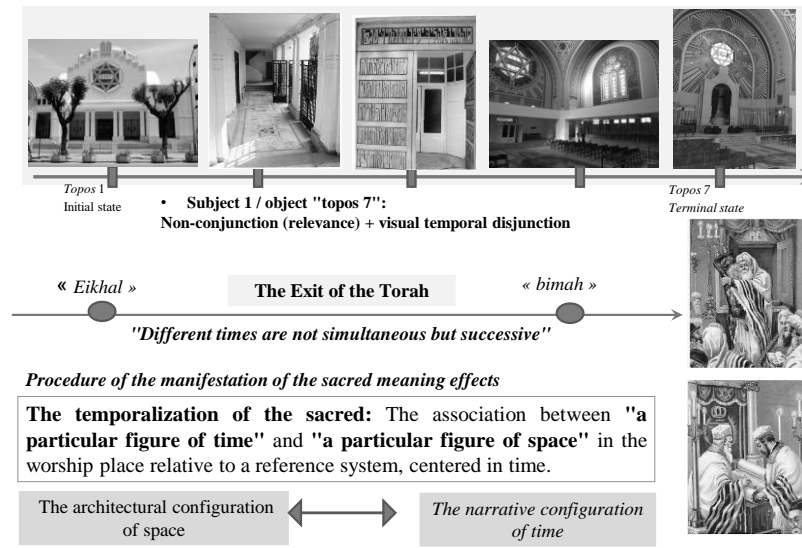


Fig.5 : Spatio-temporal concatenation in the Great Synagogue of Osiris of Tunis

We have connected the manifestation of the effects of meaning in the synagogue with the syntactical mechanism of temporalization which, according to Greimas, consists in producing the effect of meaning "temporality" and thus transforming a narrative organization into "history". It leads to the construction of a system of references which allows to place the actions temporally and to establish a network of temporal positions. The interest of this rapprochement between temporalization as a discursive mechanism (temporalization) and Judaism is to found the association between "a particular figure of time" and "a particular figure of space" in the place of worship relating to a reference system centered on time (see fig.5).

- For the Cathedral; the "topoi" are prescribed and determined by religion and the power of access to the last "topos" is determined by the status of the traversing subject "actor", just in case it is faithful to the member of the clergy. **We describe this relationship between the subject and the terminal state of the trajectory by the actorial disjunction and the relevance of the visual conjunction.** We have connected the manifestation of the effects of meaning in the cathedral with the syntactic mechanism of actorialization, which is a mechanism to build a reference system organized around the actor. This reference system centered on the figure of Jesus determines the extension of this actor "Jesus" to the limits of space and time thus making it possible to determine the Christian sanctuary, by cutting it out of the surrounding space

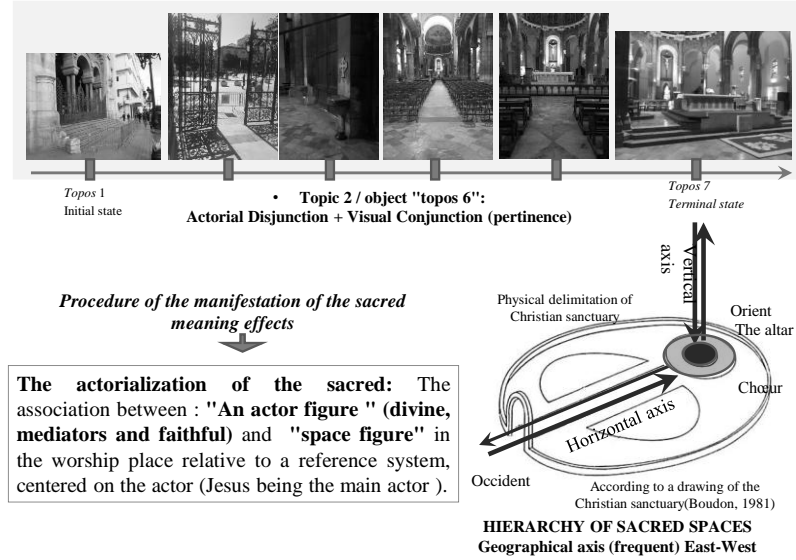


Fig.6: The spatiotemporal concatenation in the Grand Cathedral Saint-Vincent-de-Paul of Tunis

The interest of this rapprochement of the actorialization, and Christianity is to explain the association between "a particular figure of actor" and "a particular figure of space", in the place of worship relating to a system of reference centered on the person of Jesus (or the actor).

• For the mosque, all the “*topoi*” are free to access without any liturgical prescription in relation to the (ability to access). The absence of proscribed or prescribed “*topoi*” is significant for the mosque. **We qualify the relation between the traversing subject and the terminal state of the journey by the physical non-disjunction and the visual conjunction without any relevance.** We have connected the manifestation of the effects of meaning in the great mosque Ezzitouna to the syntactic mechanism of spatialization.

Note that from a sacred place in Islam it is first a sacred territory "*a haram*". These sacred territories (Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem) are hierarchical to organize the linear spread according to the geographical investment of the north-south axis and relatively the historical change of the liturgical orientation "the quiblah" from Jerusalem to Mecca. The vertical axis organizes the original place of the here, "the center" of Mecca, in relation to the original place of elsewhere "the throne of God". We thus designate by the spatialization of the sacred, the way in which the latter fits into a space that is not physically delimited. A continuity of space is, thus, ensured through the setting in association, between a figure of space "the mosque" and another figure of space "here Mecca" (see fig.7).



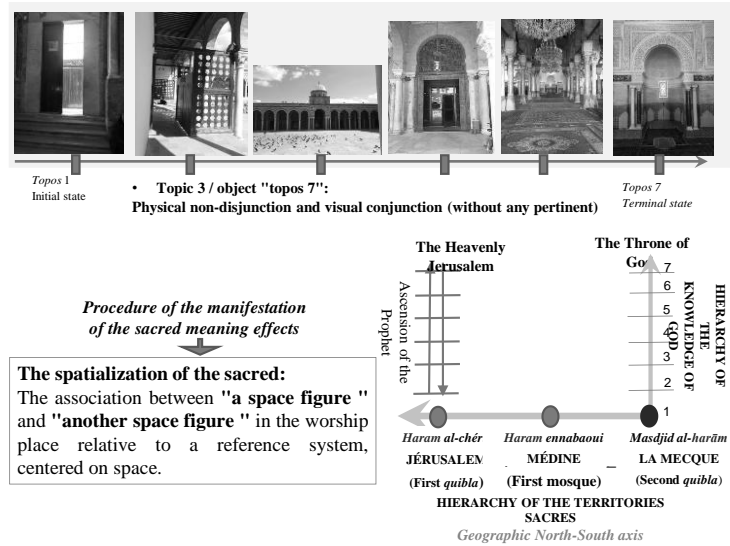


Fig. 7: The spatio-temporal concatenation in the Great Mosque Zitouna of Tunis

We have characterized each of the three semantic universes, determined by religions, by defining three reference systems centered respectively on temporal, actorial or spatial representations relative to syntactic mechanisms: temporalization, actorialization and spatialization. The sacred as a mediating level between the spiritual level and the manifestation level, corresponding to religion, exploits the paradigmatic categories of time, person, and space, in order to specify a conception of the sacred proper to each religion. The coherence of each religion is determined by the preferential positional field, which regulates the symbolic order implemented by each religion. In this case, it is space that has an existential value. In this sense, it is religion that provokes space: "*space itself being conceived only as the concept totalizing all sensible qualities.*" (Greimas, 1976). Spirituality, thus, produces a deep reading of space, a way of experiencing space and defining Being.

## Conclusion:

We have presented different levels of analysis in order to examine the mechanisms that bring deep values back to discursive manifestation. The sacred is presented as an instance, a mediator between the spiritual level, the deep level and the manifestation level, thus, exploiting the paradigmatic categories of time, actor and space in order to specify a conception specific to each monotheistic religion. . Through "the generative trajectory of meaning", various syntactical mechanisms have been exploited by the different religions studied in order to spatially project elements related to the respective spiritual foundations. The relationship between "the traveling subject and the" space object "is indicative of the specific conception of each of the three monotheistic religions.

This article allowed to expose certain results of my research in doctoral thesis related to:

- Building articulations between the spiritual, the sacred and religion and examining places of worship in the light of these articulations.
- Revealing the mechanisms of specific meaning into effect in each place of worship in relation to the codes of interpretation allowing the articulation between the spatial signifiers and the signified.
- Revealing the projective dimension of figurative structures that characterizes each religion through the semantic investment of directions and orientations
- Defining the spiritual mechanisms as linguistic and communicative mechanisms: semiotic mechanisms, allowing to give a linguistic and communicative value to the space.

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